Dear Friends,

I was glad to see a recent note posted to an animal welfare listserv by the head of an animal shelter on the West Coast.

“There is a Shelter Pet Project billboard two blocks from our facility,” the writer related, “and it has prompted several people to stop in and check us out. It is a cheerful, upbeat and positive ‘get a buddy’ message. Thank you Maddie’s Fund, HSUS and Ad Council, and also whoever assisted with placement, as this is the third billboard that has been within one mile.”

We hope that shelter leaders throughout the country share the enthusiasm for this campaign. Indeed, getting people into shelters to meet animals in need is the singular purpose behind our launch of the nation’s biggest-ever advertising initiative to promote adoption and to attack the stigma that there’s something wrong with shelter animals. The ads highlight, through irony and humor, that it’s typically a human problem, not a dog or cat problem, that results in an animal winding up at a shelter.

Since its launch in 2009, the campaign has generated $50 million in advertising, and it is expected to generate another $50 million—with ads hitting print media, radio and television, the social media platforms of the Internet, and outdoor billboards.

Data from Maddie’s Fund indicates that euthanasia of dogs and cats in shelters has declined by 10 percent since the campaign began. Over two years, the percentage of pets acquired from animal shelters and rescue groups has risen from 27 percent to 29 percent, with the number of healthy and treatable animals euthanized dropping from 3 million to 2.7 million. The daily work of shelters, rescues, and spay/neuter advocates provides the greatest explanation for this progress, and the Shelter Pet Project aims to push those numbers even further. It’s our premise that a rising tide of awareness lifts all boats.

Over the past four decades, the legislation, education, and sterilization campaigns launched by The HSUS and other animal protection organizations helped to drop euthanasia numbers from as many as 20 million dogs and cats in 1975 to today’s current low. We have a long way to go, and as we get closer to achieving our goal, each step may be tougher than the last. But this is a core issue for the animal protection movement, and it requires our concentration and the application of our best problem-solving skills.

In addition to connecting prospective pet owners with homeless animals, we must continue to reduce rates of relinquishment, ramp up affordable and accessible spay/neuter services, and help people resolve pet behavior issues in order to keep animals in the home. We must promote adoption in the community, and not wait for prospective pet parents to come to us. And we must continue to develop sophisticated and research-driven marketing campaigns, partnering with other community-based institutions to promote the lifesaving idea that the local shelter or rescue should be the first place to go when you want to bring an animal into your life.

Nationwide, only about a quarter of dogs in homes come from shelters or rescue organizations—the rest come from other sources. It will take only a relatively small increase in the adoption rate, along with a modest reduction in the birth rate, to help us solve the problem of the euthanasia of healthy and treatable dogs. The cat stats are more challenging, but the same principles apply.

Of course, we also have to carry the fight forward on other fronts, continuing our work against puppy mills, animal fighting, and other practices that contribute to the euthanasia crisis and cause so much direct suffering to companion animals. There’s no place for this kind of exploitation, and we must never hesitate to speak out against cruelty and to demand reform.

The goal is for all animals to have a safe home where their days are devoid of fear and harm, and their lives are full and complete. We’re working for that day, and we’re grateful that you are, too.

Wayne Pacelle
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